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NSC STAFF FOR SINGH

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM EG

SUBJECT: EGYPT: VIOLENT CLIMAX TO WAFD LEADERSHIP DISPUTE,
GOE RECOGNIZES NEW LEADERSHIP

REF: CAIRO 1694

Classified by ECPO Minister-Counselor Michael Corbin for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The dispute over the leadership of the Wafd, Egypt's "premier" opposition party, reached a bizarre and dramatic climax on April 1, when deposed leader Nomaan Gomaa, accompanied by armed supporters, stormed party headquarters and clashed violently with supporters of Mahmoud Abaza, who led a revolt against Gomaa that began in January. Ultimately, 23 persons were injured in the clashes and Gomaa and 14 others were arrested, now facing a host of charges including attempted murder. Wafd partisans who fought back have also been criticized for their violent excesses on April 1, but news breaking midday on April 3 - that the GOE has recognized Abaza-ally Mustafa Tawil as the new head of the party - vindicates the Abaza camp and marks an ignominious end to Gomaa's political career. The Abaza camp's consolidation of their victory against the party's old guard potentially paves the way for a revival of Egypt's faded but venerable liberal opposition party. End summary.

Home Invasion

¶2. (C) Between 8 and 9 A.M. on April 1, deposed Wafd party leader No'man Gomaa and a group of armed supporters forcibly entered party headquarters in Dokki, an upscale neighborhood just west of downtown Cairo. The relatively few party personnel present in the building were quickly and violently routed, but scores of party members, allied to de facto party leader Mahmoud Abaza and acting party president Mustafa Tawil, arrived by late morning intent on expelling Gomaa and his people. Gomaa and his gang were soon greatly outnumbered by Abaza loyalists, but kept them at bay with their guns, which they periodically discharged - injuring several Wafd personnel, including two journalists with the party paper, around 11 A.M. Gomaa's chief partner in the raid was Wafd MP Ahmed Nasser, who has a reputation as a "hot head" and was arrested in the late 1980s for firing a pistol into the air at a public rally.

Reluctant Police

¶3. (C) A group of Abaza loyalists arrived at the Public Prosecution around midday to file a formal complaint and request police intervention. Mahmoud Abaza himself arrived on the scene by 1 p.m. and began urging riot police deployed outside of the building to intervene - a request they were reluctant to accede to. Throughout the afternoon, the two

sides exchanged volleys of stones, bottles, and the occasional Molotov cocktail. An eyewitness source from Abaza's camp told us he were ashamed of the behavior of "thugs" from their own side, who viciously beat a number of Gomaa's gang, and several by-standers. The source also acknowledged that Abaza partisans were the first to throw Molotovs. Several rooms in the historic mansion were destroyed by fire, and 23 persons were treated for injuries, including gunshot wounds. Among those shot was Abaza supporter Mahmoud Ali, who received a bullet wound to the foot. Ali is well known to the Embassy in his capacity as head of the Egyptian Association to Support Democracy, which received a MEPI grant for a project encourage political participation among youth. Ali is in stable condition.

Retreat and Arrest

¶4. (C) By late afternoon, Gomaa and gang were cornered in the mansion by scores of Abaza supporters, with hundreds more gathered at the compound entrance, calling for his head. At approximately 6 p.m., Gomaa sent word that he would like safe passage out of the building. At this point, riot police carved a passage through the crowd and backed an armored truck into the gate. Gomaa, Nasser, and 14 others were transported out in the van, and taken into custody. The Public Prosecutor's office announced later in the evening that the 15 would be held for four days on suspicion of attempted murder, incitement, vandalism, and related charges.

A Slow Motion Revolt

¶5. (C) Noman Gomaa, former Dean of Cairo University law school, became leader of the Wafd Party in 2000, after the death of Fouad Serageldin, the last survivor among the party's founding fathers. Gomaa soon became unpopular within the party for his conservative, rigid, and autocratic leadership style and his intolerance of dissent. Many prominent personalities, such as Mona Makram Ebeid and Ayman Nour, defected from the party. Despite continuous grumbling within the party, Gomaa's lock on leadership held strong until his humiliating third place finish in the September 2000 presidential elections. After a campaign replete with embarrassments and missteps, Gomaa secured less than 300,000 votes (barely half of Ayman Nour's showing). The result prompted leading party members to quietly call for Gomaa to step down. Gomaa brushed aside the calls, but key party members, led by MP Mahmoud Abaza, whose aristocratic family co-founded the party in the early 20th century, began preparations to unseat him. Abaza was joined in his efforts by Party Secretary-General Fouad Badrawi, and former MP and prominent businessman Mouneer Fakhry Abdel Nour.

¶6. (C) Finally, Gomaa lost a vote of confidence by the party's central board in late January, and was formally expelled by an extraordinary party General Assembly in February. However, Gomaa and a small band of loyalists dismissed the General Assembly as invalid, and stressed that the GOE's Political Parties Committee (PPC), which licenses and regulates Egyptian political parties, still recognized him as party head. In late March, Abaza ally Mouneer Abdel Nour assured us that PPC recognition of Gomaa's expulsion was only a matter of time, and that he had been decisively and irreversibly removed. "We have the newspaper, the bank accounts, the party premises, and all the district offices," boasted Abdel Nour during a recent meeting with poloff, "Gomaa has a handful of supporters and a six year old piece of paper that says he's the chairman."

Coup de Grace

¶ 7. (C) Gomaa's precious GOE document recognizing him as Chairman of the Wafd was finally taken away with the announcement by Safwat el-Sherif on midday, April 3, that the PPC was recognizing Mustafa Tawil (Abaza's ally) as the new Chairman of the Wafd. Until this announcement, there had been considerable speculation and debate as to what the stance of the GOE was and whether it would recognize the party's new leadership or stand aside and cynically let the party's rival factions devour each other - and effectively remove another potential rival from the scene.

¶ 8. (C) Abdel Nour insisted to poloff in late March (reftel) that it was merely a question of time and modalities until the PPC recognized the new leadership. He was confident that PPC chairman (and NDP Secretary-General) Safwat el-Sherif was sympathetic and ready to work with Wafd to allow it to complete its leadership transition, but stressed that both sides were working to ensure that this recognition would be legally air-tight and invulnerable to challenge. Abdel Nour's assertions were proven correct with the PPC's April 3 move to recognize the new leadership, its action no doubt expedited by the events of April 1.

¶ 9. (C) Gomaa met with PPC chairman Sherif on March 29. While no details of this meeting were made public, it seems plausible in hindsight that Sherif advised Gomaa that PPC acknowledgment of his removal was inevitable, perhaps pushing Gomaa into a state of blind rage, or otherwise determined to go out in a blaze of glory. A March 30 court decision, throwing out a suit by Abaza to legally ban Gomaa from setting foot on party HQ, also likely figured in Gomaa's calculations.

Comment: The Day After

¶ 10. (C) The chaotic and violent events of April 1 spell an indignant end to Noman Gomaa's political career. Egyptian editorialists and commentators reacted to the event with nearly universal disgust, and virtually all agreed that the incident reflected very badly on Gomaa's judgment and character - though many also allocated blame to the Abaza camp for its violent reaction and to the government, either for being too passive or for quietly fanning the flames.

¶ 11. (C) The April 3 PPC recognition of Tawil as party leader, formalizing and finalizing Abaza's tortuously slow overthrow of Gomaa, will now allow the party to put this episode behind it and open a new chapter. Further intra-party fighting cannot be ruled out: A small camp within the party that had called for a "third way" - neither with Gomaa nor with Abaza, will now have to reconcile to the new reality, and party leadership elections (Tawil was elected as a transitional leader) will happen sometime later this year. At that time, party sources tell us, Abaza, Fouad Badrawi, and several others are likely to compete for the permanent leadership post.

¶ 12. (C) Nonetheless, the GOE has done the right thing by acknowledging the Abaza camp, which proved several times over that Gomaa does not have the confidence of the party's leadership or membership, as the legitimate authority within the party. Abaza and his allies can now combine their secular, modernist, and pragmatic approach to Egypt's political and economic woes, with a faded but still prestigious "brand name" and a national political organization to support it.

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